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To cite this article: Serawit B. Debele (2023): Citizenship in friction: becoming “Zega” in Ethiopia, African Identities, DOI: [10.1080/14725843.2023.2219499](https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2023.2219499)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2023.2219499>



Published online: 01 Jun 2023.



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Citizenship in friction: becoming “Zega” in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I focus on the concept of zega as theorised by queer Ethiopians for whom the promises of citizenship are far from available and whose national belonging is unrecognised in a political order that takes ethnicity as its main ground for citizenship. In its official iteration, the Amharic word zega means a citizen and as such it is a constitutionally recognised category. Ironically, zega is also a codeword some members of Ethiopian queer communities use. Based on how queer Ethiopians deploy zega, I highlight the ways in which they push the limits of citizenship that otherwise understands only the language of ethnicity with its undercurrent heteronormativity. I reflect on how queer Ethiopians persistently rub against mono-cultural Ethiopia to imagine other possibilities of belonging. I am interested in these practices of belonging by those whose citizenship and the entitlements that come with it are contested by hegemonic forces. Drawing on Keguro Macharia's articulation of frottage as (among others) rubbing, I explore what frictions of zega as queer with zega as a normative category of the citizen might reveal about different forms and ways of belonging. The article is based on research done with queer Ethiopians living in Ethiopia and abroad. I take my cues from the debates, conversations, reflections and observations in both online and offline spaces.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 26 August 2022
Accepted 30 April 2023

KEYWORDS

Zega-queer; Ethiopiawinet;
National Pride Day;
citizenship; friction

The idea of being an Ethiopian citizen has been contested by different groups in different historical moments. It is still an ongoing debate; one of the most unsettled differences of position about citizenship. Most of the discussions however centre ethnicity as the main political category of analysing who belongs, who has been marginalised who has benefited from holding onto a particular idea of Ethiopia and who gets disenfranchised. In this article, I look at how the notion of Ethiopiawinet/being Ethiopian is engaged by non-normative gender and sexual groups who identify as Ethiopians. By zooming in on contestations around being Ethiopian, citizenship, pride and belonging, I argue that queer Ethiopians expand the potential of zega to open it up to non-normative genders and sexualities. But the expansion of zega becomes imaginable only through what Kenyan theorist Keguro Macharia calls frottage, referring to a generative friction that makes visible what has been concealed by hegemonic heteronormative socio-political and cultural orders. Frottage is a word Macharia borrows from Max Ernst, an artist who named the act of covering a surface with a paper and rubbing it with charcoal to see the traces that become visible as a result (Macharia, 2019, p. 19). This process of revealing

involves friction that can be pleasurable but it also engenders pain, discomfort and irritation (both physical and affective).¹ Frottage as friction or rubbing is the sense in which I use the concept to analyse relations of proximity with the already violent-intimate such as home, family and the state. As such, I highlight that ‘the space provided by an attention to friction and pleasure expands the ways we can claim and practice belonging across our varied positions as ethno-national, ethnodiasporic, and Afro-diasporic’ (Macharia, p. 138). My submission is that frottage enables us to imagine belonging that zega as queer seek by rubbing against Ethiopia that refuses them and thereby (re)build a space of possibility instead of effacing their roots. The constant rubbing against the intimate (Ethiopia) generates the possibility of expanding the horizons of citizenship by displacing what Macharia calls ‘hetero-kinship’. In hetero-kinship, biological descent is given primacy (for example, the idea of the nation as a mother) but through frottage Macharia invites us to imagine belonging ‘that does not rely on a blood relationship’ (Macharia, 2019, p. 18).² As the prefix hetero implies, hetero-kinship depends on heterosexual relations that centre procreation while condemning other intimacies, sexual practices and relationships to nonexistence. This in turn enables the birth of what Macharia himself calls ethnic citizens that require rigid normative gender and sexuality as the condition of sustenance. While his analysis of ethnic citizens focuses on the history of nation building in Kenya, Ethiopia is not an isolated case given that (without disregarding specificities) both countries have been entangled within colonialism that produced the modern state in Africa. The ethnic citizen got solidified in Ethiopia in 1991 when the country adopted ethnic federalism as its governing principle. The 1995 constitution sealed the ethnic citizen whose political and social belonging is to be determined by ethnicity. As I will discuss in the subsequent sections, those outside of this normative ethnic logic (like zega Ethiopians or women) continue to rub against the heterosexual inevitability that ethnic federalism presupposes.

A note on method

This article is indebted to a series of conversations with interlocutors based in both Ethiopia and Europe. This writing became possible due to chats, debates, collective theorising and discussions. I thought with Bahiru Shewaye (based in London), Sol, Benj, Alex, Hani, Nat, Tg, Sele, Sedi, Bante, Anu, Radi, Nani, Arsi, Kidi, Guled and Zac (all based in Addis Ababa).³ These are fierce queer Ethiopians whose generosity made this work possible. But the main inspiration for this article is Cuchi, a Vienna-based nonbinary queer friend and interlocutor. The article is inspired by their interjection (which I will come back to later) to trouble what the Ethiopian government introduced as a National Pride Day in September 2019. I draw on Cuchi’s online presence as I access it from their social media engagement as well as our series of conversations that began when I first met them in Salzburg, Austria in the summer of 2017. As much as by my friends’ commitment, my ethical and moral interest in contributing to the struggle for social justice is also inspired by the rich theory, method, history of struggle I learn from following the works of African activist intellectuals.⁴ If my research and writing do anything, it is using my relative privilege to hopefully problematise what many Ethiopians seem to take for granted while meting out violence to bodies that do not conform. In other words, I do not claim objectivity because my work does ‘contain political motivations, and the truth of

[which] must be decided not in supposedly neutral reflection but in personal thought and action, in concrete historical activity' (Horkheimer, 2002, p. 222). The article proceeds as follows: I start with historicising zega in Ethiopia's social history. I then describe its adoption among queer Ethiopians which will be followed by three examples to show the interplay of zega as queer and Ethiopian. Here, I point out the continuous friction that makes possible other imaginations of existing as Ethiopian without being bound by the logics of normative gender and sexuality as well as ethnicity as the only basis of citizenship.

Zega: from subject to citizen?

Zega, as a word for citizen, refers to a 'person who holds membership in a state, with the attendant rights and responsibilities' (Smith, 2013, p. 9). It is a legal and formal category that has been recognised as such only since the 1970s (Donham & James, 2002). Before the 1970s, the word meant subject, but the state of subjecthood differed in different times and contexts. For instance, in the 18th century Gojjam area of today's Amhara region, it referred to one's socio-economic status based on land ownership. Zega was a landless person who worked on the land of the church or churchmen (Habtamu, 2003). Zega in this context is not a reference to people who were necessarily marked by their ethnic and religious identity as probably both the landowner and the worker belonged to the same social group. Similarly, Tekalign (1995) mentions zega in the context of land (re)distribution in the 19th century Shoa of today's Oromia region. He suggests that zega was introduced as a new category of tenure to refer to those who were forced to buy land which they already owned due to the incorporation of the region into royal domain. Here too, zega signifies a socially subordinate group but refers to 'subjects who paid taxes' after being forced to purchase their own agricultural land (Tekalign, 1995, p. 112). At the height of imperial expansion towards present day Southern Ethiopia in the 20th century, zega began to signify more than land ownership to define status. Non-Abyssinian groups who did not speak Amharic or confess Orthodox Christianity were called zega. These were the ones who lived on the periphery of the socio-economic, cultural and religious landscape of the Christian empire. Beside their status in relation to land ownership (after expropriation), their ethnic and religious belonging marked them as 'subdued' and 'obedient' subordinates (Donham & James, 2002). Thus, zega meant subject of the empire and more specifically one loyal to the emperor himself. On the eve of the 1974 revolution, Ethiopians who were otherwise considered as second class members of the polity (for example, Muslims) demanded for citizenship to be reconsidered (Semeneh, 2022). Despite these demands, only after the 1974 revolution has zega as citizen come 'to be applied to anyone within the boundaries of the modern state' of Ethiopia (Donham & James, 2002, p. 43). This was a time of transition from zega as an imperial subject to being legally recognised as citizens in socialist Ethiopia. Following the regime change in 1991 zega was opened even further to incorporate more ethnically marginalised groups with added cultural and linguistic rights (Smith, 2013).

Ethnic federalism is the organising and governing principle that was introduced in 1991 by the soon to be ruling bodies TPLF/EPRDF (Tigray People's Liberation Front/Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Party). Ethnic federalism made ethnic identity its 'normative base of political identification' (Smith, 2013, p. 79). As such, it has been

praised by different commentators as a progressive experiment with which Ethiopia could handle the nationalities question that gripped the political scene for decades. Some of the praises ethnic federalism received include emphasis on its potential to accommodate difference, ensure self-determination and empower ethno-linguistic groups (Assefa, 2006; Turton, 2006). Yet, scholars, including Burton and Assefa themselves, have not hesitated from pointing out certain challenges that the principle overlooks. Lahra Smith's critique of ethnic-based citizenship in relation to gender is the most relevant critique for the discussion here. Thus, despite these strides, some scholars rightfully hold the view that meaningful citizenship in Ethiopia is a promise that is yet to be fulfilled (Yonas, 2023).

While recognising progress thus far made in expanding citizenship to accommodate previously marginalised groups, Smith notes that gender is sidelined as a 'marker of political and social inequality on its own' from the debates about the meaning and content of citizenship (Smith, 2013, p. 45). Women's question remains to be an appendage. Smith speculates that neglecting women is not accidental, rather it is because ethnicity is deliberately given primacy over gender. This is demonstrated by the 'very idea that women and girls are equal participating citizens in social and political life has largely remained outside of national discourse on citizenship in Ethiopia' (Smith, 2013, p. 179). Like 'other important categories of unequal and unrealized citizenship, Ethiopian women ... find themselves in the position of striving for meaningful and expanded citizenship' (Smith, 2013, p. 190). The negligence of gender as basis of citizenship reveals the contradictions in what is celebrated as a progressive mechanism of *managing* differences. As far as the state continues to recognise citizenship based only on ethnicity, it is not just gender, it is also sexuality that is left to strive for meaningful inclusion in "the effective practice of citizenship. [...] and] the ability and environment for realisation of rights and discharging of duties within a polity in ways that have practical implications for all citizens' lives" (Smith, 2013, p. 4). The criminalisation of queer Ethiopians shows the problems with selectively granting only procreative ethnic citizens the right to full existence. Irrespective of the gains in expanding citizenship, the law is still trapped by the politics of respectability that it inherited from imperial Christian Ethiopia. In the revised penal code of 2004, the government tightened the penal law against what the old empire used to call 'sexual deviance'.

This means that while queer Ethiopians might be welcome as members of an ethnic group (within the framework of ethnic federalism), they are immediately removed from their conditional incorporation because they fail at perpetuating the ethnically federated nation. Yet, in the spirit of striving for meaningful citizenship, queer Ethiopians push back seeking a pride of place in the country. One may ask, as my friend Bahiru once did, why don't they say *to hell with Ethiopia?* James Baldwin's contemplation gives us some clue as to why some refuse to efface their origin. Reflecting on his relations to the American culture and his place in it, Baldwin writes 'Even the most incorrigible maverick has to be born somewhere. He may leave the group that produced him-he may be forced to- but nothing will efface his origins, the marks of which he carries with him everywhere' (Baldwin, 1961, p. 10). So, it is not so outlandish that queer Ethiopians, though not all of them, insist on intimacy to home even when it is 'produced, and reproduced under conditions of de-subjectivation' to quote Keguro Macharia (Macharia, 2019, p. 158). Particularly those who join the diaspora and get confronted with inter and intra racial politics,

connect to home so as to fend off the anxiety of being ‘unrooted’ that leaving one’s home may impose.⁵ Bahi, for example, told me that he had maintained distance from Ethiopia until recently. But now, he is of the view that he has no reason to forgo his entire formation, for example within the Orthodox Church when he fully well knows that God loves him. He wears habesha clothes and jewelries. He wears a necklace with a big cross for which he gets a lot of pushback. He now calls himself *bale meskelu gay* (the gay with a cross) and this way he is determined to rub against and irritate those who feel dared by this self-assertion/self-affirmation (Bahiru Shewaye, personal communication, 29 October 2022). But, queer Ethiopians also do not seek to be assimilated into the universe of hetero-Ethiopia as will be shown in the next sections.

Zega as queer: disrupting normative citizenship

While the above interpretations of zega mainly draw on the evolution of citizenship as a legal category, it is also used to refer to someone who is a non Ethiopian national more colloquially. Yewuchi zega or just zega in ordinary communications, of course depending on the context, means a foreign national. According to Ordinary Zac, himself a zega who did an extensive research on the history of the word’s adoption, the formation of a yahoo group by female sex workers in the early 2000s Addis Ababa is behind the popularisation of zega as the codeword among queer Ethiopians. This was a time when the slow Dial-up internet, as it was called in Ethiopia, was available to a limited circle of well-connected Addis Ababans. In order to attract foreign customers, these women created the yahoo group. Incidentally, the group came to be visible among gay foreign nationals who were coming to visit Ethiopia. They started approaching the women who run the group to connect them with male sex workers and offered to pay for the facilitation. Through this arrangement, an African American man was connected to a male sex worker called Mantegbosh via this group. Although Mantegbosh did not speak English, the two somehow found a way to make an arrangement for the night. When Mantegbosh’s friend Atelel realised that his friend was going with the foreigner, he jokingly asked ‘oh now you are going with a zega?’ Mantegbosh answered yes responding to the mockery. The word took off from there and now it is used by many in and outside of Ethiopia. Ordinary Zac comments, since at the time there was no fast internet, social media or mobile phone, the spread of the word zega as a marker of the queer community owed word of mouth (Ordinary, 2022). Another yahoo group called ‘Gay Ethiopians’, that connected Ethiopians at home and in the Diaspora, was formed afterwards and might be behind the further spread of this name. The Gay Ethiopians yahoo group popularised the word zega even further as a code word to communicate within their circle thereby planting the seed for small queer community formation. The silent consensus was that zega would not raise suspicion because it means citizen which circulates everyday and that every Ethiopian identifies with it or uses to identify a foreigner.⁶

While a few queer Ethiopians are skeptical of the word because of its masculinist undertone, it still serves as a code word by particularly gay men who live in Addis Ababa.⁷ This means that there is no consensus around its current connotation. Some argue it is too narrow as this snippet indicates:

zega is a conscious refusal for the word sodomite. Zega was something that I endorse- but not identifying with it. It still requires some work, for instance right now as a fem nonbinary body, to what level does zega represent me and to what level can I see myself in zega? You know because of the manliness it presupposes in the Ethiopian queer movement. And there has to be work to balance that ... Some years back, I used zega because I did not have a better language but now I found the language, the vernacular the technology. If someone asks me now I see myself within the umbrella of transness (Faris Cuchi Gezahegn, personal communication, June 23, 2021).

However, there is an understanding that the community should still stick to the word. Perhaps given the elasticity of the word, my interlocutors even suggested to scale zega up. There is an awareness of the potentials of the notion in pushing forward the agenda and 'project of aspiring citizens' for inclusion (Smith, 2013, p. 10). Since citizenship has been expanding in Ethiopia to include previously marginalised groups, it might not be surprising that zega can be pushed to meaningfully include those excluded on the basis of gender and sexuality. That might be why some zega Ethiopians began to articulate it as representing the idea that queer Ethiopians are citizens and they are here. In fact, Cuchi advocates for the Africanisation of zega. They told me

if you see the work of House of Guramayle,⁸ it is evolving, it is including Eritrea, Djibouti, Somali and Ethiopia ... so yes zega definitely can extend to capture these international experiences and worlds in which we live. I think it should be internationalised ... this is how queer got globalised and universalised and if we are introducing notions from our language and experience and histories of struggle, that could be one way of countering ... zega is also easy to say and it can encompass these larger African community the Diaspora ... powerful than any English word. (Faris Cuchi Gezahegn, personal communication, June 23, 2021)

However, it is striking that zega is rare in the literature on sexuality as much as sexuality is almost absent in the debates on citizenship in the country. There is less work that directly tackles zega with its layered connotations as meaning citizen as well as queer and how this layeredness enriches our understanding of citizenship and belonging in an Ethnically federated Ethiopia. Indeed, a few scholars like Getnet (2012) and Seifu (2006) use zega to refer to the community in their work. I should note that when it appears, zega is used by some in problematic ways. For instance, in his research on men having sex with men (MSM), Seifu states that 'they' call themselves zega and goes on to asserting that zega men's insatiable sexual urge is becoming a national problem (Seifu, 2006, p. 36). Needless to say that there are far reaching consequences when scholars use these colonial stereotypes to represent non normative desirers as sources of national health crisis. On account of zegas' depiction as national threat, Ethiopia presents itself as a heterosexual nation that needs to fight 'homosexuality' by removing them from citizenship and ensuing privileges, such as legal protection, that come with it.⁹

Yet, in the context of its usage by queer Ethiopians, I argue that zega has the potential to expand the limits of what Lahra Smith calls 'meaningful citizenship' to include non-normative genders and sexualities. Yet, we know well that the longing for intimacy and belonging by zega is not possible through the prescriptive logic of normativity because to belong to Ethiopia within a normative framework comes with the burden of not only being a child but also having to bear one for the nation. Belonging here understands only the grammar of procreation as its condition of possibility. Thus, according to the hetero-kinship and its standards of what makes one a good citizen, queer Ethiopians may not

participate in a (re)productive way in the polity and hence their exclusion. The assumption that zega presence introduces disruption to a smoothly flowing citizenship practice is well aligned to and reproduces heteronormativity. That is why zegas' claims to belonging must be launched in friction with these moral standards and its grounds of othering. As its conditions of possibility, queer citizenship needs fabulation 'to imagine and theorize and practice strategies that make our beings possible' (Macharia, 2019, p. 137). Fabulation, according to Tavia Nyong'o, is a critical practice of 'always seeking to cobble something together, to produce connections and relations however much the resultant seams show' (Nyong'o, 2014, p. 77). And a 'fabulist is a teller of tales, but he or she also discloses the powers of the false to create new possibilities' (Nyong'o, 2014, p. 71). I want to draw on Nyong'o's insight to read the counter narratives that are cobbled together in friction and how we can think about those narratives as a critique of Ethiopia's ethnic federalism. The appropriation of zega to refer to oneself is already a practice in fabulation if fabulation is all about conjuring up new relations and connections, if it is about making present the people who are missing from the space of citizenship. But fabulation as a critical practice does not promise comfort; there is a risk of irritation and pain (caused by poking the authenticity of 'pure' Ethiopianness) as much as pleasure (in creating space for queer affirmation) because its imaginative possibilities are explored through rubbing and creating friction against that which negates.¹⁰

Happy Pride Day in Ethiopia: a queer twist

The last three days leading up to the Ethiopian new year celebrated on 11 September are packaged as National Pride Day. It is one of the few national holidays Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's administration introduced. The first one was celebrated with a series of events at the Meskel Square and Millennium Hall on 8 September 2019. It is said that the 'celebration not only strengthens the cohesion and harmony of Ethiopians but also expedites peace, democracy and sustainable economic development of the nation . . . celebrating the National Pride Day, therefore, could further help to build up unity among Ethiopians' (Ethiopian News Agency, 2019).¹¹ The motive of introducing a National Pride Day was made even clearer in the speech the then speaker of the house of federation Keria Ibrahim delivered. Keria emphasised the need for transcending ethnic and religious differences in the interest of national unity, which she asserted is what the country needs most. She stressed that, instead of pitting against each other, one ethnic group should see the other as a source of pride. She also added that there is no religious or ethnic identity, or any identity for that matter, that should be seen as a threat to the other. All identities should be seen as a resource to build a prosperous and proud Ethiopia.¹² The line 'any identity for that matter' seems to gesture towards some kind of recognition of difference that exceeds ethno-religious markers. One might ask whether the newly imagined Ethiopia accommodates others such as those who are marked by their gender and sexuality or remains stuck with the hyper politicised ethnic identities. However, perhaps it is not Keria's duty as the speaker of a house of federation in which ethnic representatives from all over the country sit to open a room for non ethnic-citizens when she alluded to 'all identities'. However, the first celebration still invites several questions. For example, have the Ethiopian government officials saw a queer twist coming when they declared a National Pride Day? Are they aware that Pride is now almost synonymous with out and loud celebration of

queerness in many parts of the world? Is it possible to empty Pride of its history rooted in the gay liberation struggle and use it to push a heteronormative agenda? How has zega as a queer Ethiopian subjectivity that screams ‘we are here, we belong’ rubbed against Ethiopia’s national pride day? Has zega as queer created irritation on the notion of Ethiopiawinet?¹³ With these questions in mind, let me now return to Cuchi’s interjection.

On 8 September 2020, Faris Cuchi Gezahegn, a non-binary Vienna-based Ethiopian queer activist, reimagines what an Ethiopian national pride day might look like if it were more inclusive by giving it a queer twist. On their personal twitter page, Cuchi wished all Ethiopians a happy National Pride Day and made ‘an intervention on this occasion.’ They wrote

As Ethiopia officially celebrated Pride Day today, I know Ethiopians who look, speak, think, love, grow and learn like me are not recognized in such celebration. I took the initiative to do an intervention where I center my Ethiopian queer siblings that are constantly being othered by the majority of Ethiopians who have the audacity to dictate who is Ethiopian & how these Ethiopians should move through this world. They dare to confront us (queer & other othered Ethiopians), who inherently don’t fit into such narratives, with plenty of ferociousness and vulgarity. I want to especially encourage my queer siblings who are in Ethiopia & outside of Ethiopia to take what is intrinsically ours: us being both queer & Ethiopian is valid. We do not need anyone’s permission to know it, to live as one, to take pride in it as well, and to comprehend the fact that no one (including other Ethiopians) is in position to invalidate our reality. Incite such ownership with yourself. Refuse to be ridiculed by their spectacle that speaks a lot about themselves rather than about you, an imagination that is invaded by neo-colonialism which is thirsty for dominance. As we claim our Queerness and Ethiopian-ness, I also want to raise our awareness that the same understanding, narrative, system, and rhetoric that is rejecting us is also rejecting many other bodies. We must actively work to dismantle it. As queer bodies, our aspiration should not be to assimilate into a system that never ceases to suck blood through the capitalist system infested with patriarchy that polices bodies.

Happy Pride Day in Ethiopia!!!

At the point of closing their intervention with happy pride day in Ethiopia, Cuchi’s fabulation culminates with a major twist. They fabulated by rearranging the event by foregrounding their imaginative indulgences of what could have been if Ethiopia celebrated Pride as moment of affirmation for queer Ethiopians as well. In saying happy pride day *in* Ethiopia, they are moving the global event of queer Pride to Ethiopia instead of acknowledging the pride day that Ethiopian politicians conjured up that excludes queer Ethiopians. The spirit of Cuchi’s intervention is very much like a manifesto that could potentially be read on a pride event because it is above all about self acceptance, love, affirmation, solidarity, liberation and imagination of a liveable world. The status or the performativity of the National Pride event as organised by the Ethiopian government is jeopardised by Cuchi’s intervention because it decentres the ethnic and centres the people who are missing; ‘Ethiopian queer siblings’ and ‘other othered Ethiopians’. While the event in Ethiopia is anchored around ethnic diversity and how to use it as a political resource, Ethiopia as a bacon of ethnic and religious diversity is relegated to oblivion in Cuchi’s musings. In centring queer siblings, Cuchi refuses ‘coercive mimeticism’ that Nyong’o borrows from Rey Chow to describe ‘the profound self-hatred’ dominant forces engender on minoritarian subjects (Nyong’o, 2014). In the Ethiopian context, the socio-cultural, political and religious sensibilities and forces are agents of this coercive mimeticism that induce profound hatred among the minoritised. Cuchi calls up on those on the

margin to breakaway from the self-hatred, the doubt, the paranoia existing as an 'other' induces and instead encourages them 'to assert and enact that "I is another," and to fabulate a different version of the story that coercive mimeticism would have [them] tell' (Nyong'o, 2014, p. 76). This is not to say that all of this goes on seamlessly, the seam that Nyong'o fears in fabulation is there. After all, to suture 'queerness and Ethiopian-ness' when one is up against a ferocious and vulgar 'system that never ceases to suck blood' is deemed to have seams. It shows in the offense some Ethiopians took because Cuchi reclaimed Pride in being an Ethiopian queer person.

Proud bushti-proud Ethiopian

While queer Ethiopians use zega to name themselves, Ethiopia refuses its queer members and disparagingly calls them bushti¹⁴ to seal that refusal. Bushti names failure in the production of manhood. It defines those who have failed at heteronormativity and the (hu)manhood it implies. It is shouted by many on the streets of Addis Ababa to evoke shame on those who 'look, walk, talk and act like gay' (Anu B., personal communication, 18 November 2017). It names the ejection of queer people from what makes one a respectable Ethiopian. It is deployed to discipline gender non-conforming boys at school. This slur word as a signifier of one's failure in their progression towards manhood does the job of naming to alienate. Through bushti, most of my queer friends have shared stories of their first encounter with themselves as different not in an affirmative way but different as an anomaly. Their childhood mates and fellow pupil at school call them bushti, a word used to refer to non-masculine traits displayed by young school children. Their journey towards proper manhood is depicted as aborted because of the sassy ways in which they conduct themselves.

Bushti is also used to show that someone's manhood is questionable because of their sexuality. Through naming, queer Ethiopians encounter themselves as subjects interpellated by insult that singles out their sexuality and depicts it as something they have to be ashamed of (Baynham et al., 2021). This is usually accompanied by 'the sense of spatial dislocation, of estrangement in apparently familiar spaces, such as the home and the social life of the school' (Baynham et al., 2021, p. 233). They are forbidden (in fact they have failed) from entering the Ethiopian universe with which they are familiar; one that knows and names them bushti. I think the issue of incorporation into a community and the role naming plays at an early age are crucial. The Nigerian philosopher Ifeanyi Menkiti highlights that beyond acknowledging the biological fact of the body, we need to take into account ontological progression as a road to incorporation.

For Menkiti, ontological progression is a journey the body which is represented as 'it' takes to establish one's standing as a person in their community (Menkiti, 2004). Incorporation is achieved through a move from the present to the past. The conditions for incorporation stem from experiences accumulated since childhood and one's past is what makes or breaks their chances at incorporation. And the 'community plays a vital role both as catalyst and as prescriber of norms' (Menkiti, 2004, p. 326). This progress towards personhood begins with naming the child and continues to 'other important transitions such as marriage, the producing of children, the taking of titles, etc.' (Menkiti, 2004, p. 325–26). A specific normative-family/kinship centric-lived experience is the foundation to claim a standing as a complete person in the community. This means that one can succeed or fail at being

incorporated as a worthy member. If one fails, this sets the conditions for the introduction of incompleteness and thereby an inscription of a stranger based on how one performs received norms. These strict expectations to arrive at personhood are the gatekeepers by which communities determine who can be admitted and who gets rejected.

If, as Menkiti says, naming is the beginning of the journey to incorporation, naming itself signifies ejection. This refusal to incorporate nonheterosexual bodies and desires places queer Ethiopians in a continuous state of strangeness. The self as a 'stranger' begins at that early age when they begin to ask if there are others elsewhere or that they are alone. From this place of estrangement, the zega launch a world making journey where other possibilities are imagined and invented. For example, the bushti epithet circulates within the zega community members, appropriated by those who argue that they have to own it in order for it to lose its power of humiliating them. The more daring ones own bushti publicly, they say 'proud bushti and proud Ethiopian' (Amharic *kuru bushti kuru Ethiopiawi*). They assert that queerness and Ethiopianess, though they seem not to get along in the conventions, are not mutually exclusive. They respond to those who call them bushti by saying 'yes are you talking to me?' They irritate their detractors by not getting irritated as they were expected to react. Some social media handles have the name bushti among others (Faris Cuchi Gezahegn, personal communication, 17 July 2017 and Bahiru Shewaye, personal communication, 29 October 2022). On the occasion of the 2017 Vienna Pride, Cuchi carried a placard that says 'Proud Bushti, proud Ethiopian' the text is written in Amharic under the Ethiopian flag.

Andrew T. Jacobs calls this slur appropriation, which he sees as a form of critique that transforms the group which is targeted by the epithet. Slur appropriation has the potential of asserting the humanity of the otherwise victimised by the discourses (Jacobs, 2002). The zega appropriate this slur word and 'recharged it with a new meaning so that it will not have the negative force it had' on them and other zegas. Owning bushti is 'a way of throwing the pain back at the very people who use it to inflict pain on me, to abuse me and to disempower me' (Faris Cuchi Gezahegn, personal communication, 17 July 2017).¹⁵ Some even use bodily performances such as decoration, dance, comedy, and experimentation with different outfits that are either exclusive to the Ethiopian orthodox church members or those relegated to the 'other othered Ethiopians'.¹⁶ If queer Ethiopians have failed in the prescriptive logics of incorporation their failure in heterosexuality is a generative point from where other ways of being in the world are imagined through fiction and fabulation. As we learn from the life of my friends, failure by heteronormative standards is where friction of divergent imaginations and practices happen for the emergence of something else (Halberstam, 2011; Macharia, 2019). Something else that gives rise to different connections with the self, the other, various histories and hopes generated by these multiplicities. This is a textbook example of fabulation meets rubbing to irritate. Zega cobble something by merging bushti with the Ethiopian flag to create a moment of pride for themselves.

Zega in relation with other othered Ethiopians

Grinding against and colliding with different stories and practices of Ethiopianess that are not within the conventions give rise to something that breaks away from canonic Ethiopia. This queer rub continues to shock heterosexual Ethiopia because it is banging

it against two seemingly mutually exclusive aspects of becoming zega: Ethiopian and queer. Unlike the ethno-religious diversity Ethiopia celebrates in the National Pride Day, in queer practices of freedom no one is left behind. Zega Ethiopians imagine an Ethiopia that overturns the heteronationalist claim that relies on citizens' capacity and will for procreation. An Ethiopia whose sustenance relies on a purposefully managed gender and sexuality loses might with queer fabulation. Zega constantly question the (re)presentation of the category Ethiopian as heterosexual on which only a few have monopoly. They invent a more expansive Ethiopia through rubbing against historical, cultural, religious and socio-political basis of singularity that most invoke through the notion of Ethiopian exceptionalism (e.g. uncolonised and oldest Christian civilisation, etc.). The emphasis on diversity is an acknowledgment of the existence of others on the margin and is a critique of the violence this othering entails by calling for an intersectional and collective struggle for social change. Two examples.

First, the recent national turmoil (particularly the war in northern Ethiopia) has brought out interesting introspections about the gaps of ethnic federalism. There are internally displaced Ethiopians from all ethnic groups, rape has been weaponised during the war, university students have been abducted, so obviously the ethnic category is not able to sustain itself because the boundaries are no more (have never been anyway) stable. Violence has made everyone vulnerable. This raises a moral question about solidarity. According to Sofanit, one way of trespassing the ethnic citizen trap is through thinking in relation with othered others. These othered others are not to be defined based on solid categories in terms of oppressed ethnic identities, religious groups or gender. It needs to be qualified as a relation of the marginalised even when the person exists within the so-called ethnic category that promises to protect them. These could be women, children, the homeless, victims of rape and other forms of violence (Sofanit D., personal communication, 7 October 2022). Yenenesh makes a similar point saying that

none of the categories like ethnic or religious protect me even if I say I am ethnic Oromo or I am a Muslim. Even if I assume my belonging might be granted for a moment, I know I will be excluded the moment I mention my gender or sexual identity because mine does not conform with what they understand. People justify violence on me with utmost ease. So I have to make a choice, whose side do I wanna be in these challenging times? Can I be loyal to my ethnicity knowing that I will not be welcome? No! I side with the oppressed, with the displaced, with the vulnerable. I do this irrespective of their pronounced ethnic, religious, gender or sexual identity. (Yenenesh A., personal communication, April 10, 2022)

Beyond decidedly identifying with the vulnerable, queer Ethiopians also seek connection, healing and hope from non-Christian and non-secular sources such as indigenous spiritual practices. Reflecting the importance of uncovering multiplicity Ethiopia embodies and ironically conceals, zega represents defiance in the most uncomfortable way as far as mainstream Ethiopia goes. Cuchi told me a befitting example about their endorsement of indigenous spirituality which in mainstream religious and cultural traditions are looked down upon. They said

I am endorsing the indigenous spiritualities I grew up loathing ... I consider them as part of what makes me as a trans/queer person because I strongly believe our history of acceptance, respect and value as humans really goes into indigenous knowledge and spirituality. This gives me the hope because you would find stories ... people saying oh yes my grandmother tells me that there is this person present in a feminine energy but has a masculine body, but

this person is respected. That needs to be understood, studied and vocalised because it informs my hope, because my hope and understanding is not always dark. If I am not optimistic, if I do not see light in what I do, I would not do it. But I believe in the capacity and ability of my people to understand, to know better and do better and also I have seen it. I have only done this [activism] for ten years or so but I have seen so many people shift from personally hating me to personally loving me and fighting my fight. (Faris Cuchi Gezahegn, personal communication, June 23, 2021)¹⁷

A way of becoming Ethiopian in the plural is imagined through making space for and thinking through indigenous spiritualities as part of the collective that makes up Ethiopia. By resorting to indigenous knowledge and practice, queer Ethiopians refuse those who say zega have lost their permission to being Ethiopian the moment they gave into 'western influence' because, for some there is nothing Ethiopian in desiring, loving and living non-heterosexually. Needless to say how much Cuchi's defiance is celebrated as reassuring for zega Ethiopians who do not have to look at white Europeans and Americans to 'confirm' that they are not alone in the world with non-normative desires for intimacy. Most young queer Ethiopians have difficulty coming to terms with desiring differently. They do online research to see if there are others who feel the same way. What usually happens is that they are confronted with whiteness, in the movies, online resources and what not. This puts the young Ethiopians in an even more awkward position because it feeds into the widely held belief that queer is white reinforcing their own doubt that they might be victims of western imperialism.¹⁸ Much to the uplifting of queer spirits, Cuchi's coming out and public presence has encouraged Ethiopians by challenging the idea that queer is a 'lifestyle' privileged white people do.¹⁹ Even more inspiring for many who look up to them is that Cuchi redefined Ethiopia and indigenised queerness opening up possibilities for belonging and self acceptance. Relationality here works in distancing oneself from ethnic federalism, reimagining healing through indigenous spirituality, reassuring queer Ethiopians that they are not alone and that they are not the problem; a new relation with the self is also being cultivated (Tg, Sele, Sedi, Bante, Anu, Radi, Nani, group discussion/debate, 23 June 2021).²⁰

Conclusion

If frottage is rubbing against something to make what is hidden visible, zega frottage scratches to visibilise what has been obscured by an idea of Ethiopia that masquerades as a mono/hetero entity. Even if ethnic federalism came to grant self-determination for diverse ethnic groups, the single major cultural ethos that also informs political and legal decisions, including its conditions of existence, is heteronormative. The heterosexual ethnic citizen sustains the country. In collusion with this singularity, zega frottage exposes the fractures and makes possible imaginations of belonging outside of citizenship based on ethnicity. The adoption of zega as a name, Cuchi's intervention on Ethiopian national pride day, the zega push back against strange(r)ness bushti implies and the relationship zega foster with other othered Ethiopians beyond ethnic lines rub against the heteronormative conditions of belonging as an ethnic citizen. These critical practices of fabulation that scratch deep into the surface of what is usually taken for granted reveal that ethnic-based citizenship in Ethiopia is continuously problematised. The practices also expose that there are different modes of

becoming, sense making and belonging in the social world friction opens up. Rather than the sham of coherent heterosexual(ised) connections channeled through marriage, family or kinship ties, or nation, zega rubs against ethnicised/nationalist sensibilities to produce a possibility for citizenship that is beyond normative conditions of incorporation.

Thus, looking into these practices of fabulation reveal that Ethiopia and queer are entangled. Zega as friction is not a complete rejection of one's root but a search for possibilities to widen it through rubbing and creating fractures. In a sense, it works on disidentification with the mainstream (not necessarily to reject but to refashion) another way of belonging by making Ethiopia inhabitable.²¹ Zega friction works with and against a certain hegemonic socio-cultural sensibility to conjure something up by deforming and transforming what exists. While this act of rubbing creates irritation for Ethiopia's mono-cultural-legal-political sensibilities, it promises the possibility of existing 'otherwise' for queer Ethiopians. Their fabulation foregrounds non-normative gender and sexuality as domains of citizenship in a country that is bogged down with ethnicity as the only way in and out of politics.

Notes

1. Macharia thinks with frottage in engaging with the works of four Black Diaspora and African intellectuals namely the works of Claude McKay, Jomo Kenyatta, Rene Maran and Frantz Fanon, to think about Blackness and multiple forms of belonging outside and beyond the heteronormative kinship.
2. He elaborates more on this in his discussion of Jomo Kenyatta's crucial role in the making of modern Kenya whose formation of national identity is founded on the management of difference that only acknowledges normative gender and sexuality. Macharia writes in Kenyatta's Kenya, 'one becomes and retains full ethnicity in fulfilling this hetero-promise to reproduce' (Macharia, 2019, p. 137).
3. Except Faris Cuchi Gezahegn and Bahiru Shewaye's the rest of the names mentioned here are anonymised and shortened deliberately for the reasons of the safety of my friends and interlocutors based in Ethiopia.
4. The list of intellectuals whose work I draw inspiration from is too long to exhaust. These women include my own mother(s) whose collective praxis of cultivating generations has contributed to my intellectual formation. For this article specifically, I learn a great deal about queerness and its generative possibilities from Dankwa (2021) and Nyeck (2021).
5. I borrow unrooted in relation to diaspora from Sandra Harvey where she introduces it in the context of her analysis of blackness within the diaspora/indigenous tension (Harvey, 2021).
6. However, this is changing in recent times due to the popularisation of the word and its coded meaning by 'anti-gay' activists in the country. This is more so the case in Addis Ababa where the 'anti-gay' activists use their access to media to ostracise minoritised groups, the kinds of codes they use to communicate in public, and their looks in terms of clothes, hairstyle, make up, tattoos, piercings and accessories such as rings. As a result, some zega are becoming increasingly cautious of publicly using the word.
7. However, it should be noted that some zega are more careful not to take for granted the safety zega promised at the outset. They argue that other Ethiopians are now becoming aware of the specific group of people who call themselves zega and are targeting them with violence.
8. HoG is an advocacy group founded by queer Ethiopians living in Europe and America. <https://houseofguramayle.org/our-story/>.

9. Despite such problematic assertions, there are a handful of scholars committed to challenging such positions. For instance, Selamawit (2014), Betelhem (2010), Betelhem and White (2011), Getnet (2012), Getnet and Woldekidan (2019) and Daniel (2009) are few of the scholars whose work promotes the human rights of sexual minorities, calls for decriminalisation, demands the right to access to health.
10. This possibility through friction and rubbing makes room for pleasure sought outside of heteronormativity. The metaphor then mirrors what Lorde puts forward in her essay 'The erotic as Power' which says the erotic is a resource with far reaching consequences irreducible to just personal feelings. The erotic is one of the 'sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change' and can be sought through rubbing and friction not only penetrative sex (Lorde, 1984, p. 61).
11. 'Thousands Turn out to Celebrate National Pride Day.' 2019. 'Thousands Turn out to Celebrate National Pride Day.' *Ethiopia News Agency*, September 8. <https://www.ena.et/en/?p=9589>.
12. This is my translation from Amharic to English. ማህሌት ታደሊ. 2019. 'ብሔራዊ የኩራት ቀን ጥናንትና በአዲስ አበባ በተለያዩ ዝግጅቶች ተከብሯል.' Sheger Radio, September 8. <https://www.mixcloud.com/discover/የኩራት-ቀን/>.
13. Ethiopiawinet literally means a state of being an Ethiopian that only accepts a specific way in which one can be an Ethiopian-that does not always allow room for difference and hence Cuchi's 'othered Ethiopians'. A quick look at the country's imperial history and its role in cultural formations exposes this narrowly defined Ethiopiawinet.
14. Pousti is a Greek word for 'fagot' or 'homosexual' as derogatory and Bahiru believes that the word Bushti might have its roots in this word. Though there is a need for further exploration, Bahiru's speculation is not farfetched given that there are some foreign words which are adopted and used in the everyday.
15. A similar observation about slur appropriation can be made about the word queer and how it got redefined from 'odd' in to a notion that captures a more powerful act of political mobilisation by minoritised groups across the globe.
16. This 'other othered Ethiopians' makes sense if situated in the current debates around ethnic identities in the country in relation to histories of imperial expansion and modern state formation for which there is a rich scholarship. Cuchi is acknowledging the existence of marginalised groups on the basis of ethno-religious identities even when ethnic federalism attempts to amend that historical injustice which created these conditions of centre/periphery.
17. Cuchi's statement can also be read as a critique of what Puar (2007) calls 'queer secularity' as a condition for a creation of a liberal individual queer subject. Zega critique this by resorting to alternative spiritualities to the dominant Christian Ethiopia and secular queer subjectivity that western liberalism presupposes.
18. For Cuchi, the source of this dilemma young queer Ethiopians face is partly linked to the way in which queer activism, theorising and discourses are white-centric. Cuchi says 'the queer movement, how they construct the image is completely global north and white and that absolutely contributes to how we are being discriminated in Africa, in the global south, as western things.'
19. What Cuchi says is a frustration shared by intellectuals such as, Massad (2008), Asfanh Najmabadi (2012), Macharia (2019) and Nyeck (2021) to mention but a few-who emphasise the disconnects between Euro-American centric queer theorising that masquerades as universal and a standard for queer life as lived in other geohistories.
20. I should note that some of the people I am speaking of are those who have relative safety (London and Vienna based activists) But beyond their safety, there is also a particular way in which their sense of belonging to Ethiopia is shaped by their location in Europe. They live in a place where the urge for belonging becomes more urgent for many reasons such as racist encounters that expose the fact that Europe is not the queer heaven it promises to be. While they are forced to leave Ethiopia for Europe in search of safety, the queer world that received them is too white to the extent that one always needs an anchor that one could call home. Frottage to reclaim Ethiopia tends to be a matter of survival. But here is where the burden of

representation comes. For some living in Ethiopia it is a difficult thing to take because they feel targeted because of the irritating work those in the Diaspora do. For others it is a source of huge inspiration, hope, a turning-tables that one would have loved to be a part of. Instead of looking up on white queer people for affirmation, they have their own siblings to look up to. There is need for more research and conversation on how these new experiences that came out of their status as immigrants shaped their sense and definition of home, belonging, citizenship, national identity.

21. Here, I am thinking about Muñoz's (2013) articulation of disidentification as a performance that tries to make possible queer existence by transforming the dominant cultural ethos.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This article is the outcome of research conducted within the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence at the University of Bayreuth, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy – [EXC 2052/1 – 390713894].

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